

That's the way to do it

By David Sexton, Evening Standard 27.02.08
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Friendly and expert: Waiting staff at The Mercer got it just right

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Given how much money is made in the City, it's surprising how restrained its restaurants can be. The Mercer - opened in December on the site of a former champagne bar called The Ballroom by manager Jason Bedford and chef Warren Lee - is a truly proficient exercise in good taste.

It feels immediately comfortable, luxurious without being ostentatious. The room has a vaguely Thirties, New York-ish feel, with high ceilings, glossy black columns, big mirrors and hanging globe lights.

The tables are well spaced, laid with excellent linen, plain crockery and cutlery; the seating comfortable; the waiters, formally dressed in black and white, quick, friendly and expert.

You can drink your way skywards here, if you can afford it. The wine-list is a dreamy publication, opening at £4 a 175ml glass for a Languedoc Merlot but rising to treasures. **Many are made slightly more accessible by an Enomatic system, delivering a range of fine wines by the glass or small carafe, as well as by the bottle.**

Any list with a separate section devoted to Pichon Lalande and Pichon Baron (11 bottles, ranging from Tourelles de Longueville 2001 at £50, to a magnum of Pichon Lalande 1982 at £1,500) has me suckered straight away. Even a modest Pauillac (Tour Pibran 2001, as it might be) improves the day, don't you find?

And the food matches up well. Lemon and rosemary cured Scottish salmon, sour cream and salmon caviar, £8.50, was a delicious concoction, with mild fennel rings and toasted rosemary needles going surprisingly well with the fishy mix.

A special of tender, caramelised scallops (£8) came on a soupy little bed of whole fresh peas with a slice of crisp bacon and, scarcely noticeable, a light lobster sauce - a more rustic version of the griddled scallops with pea purée Rowley Leigh used to serve in Kensington Place.

Whole roast red-legged Partridge (£18) ran into the problem that simply roasting the bird whole always creates - cooking the legs enough slightly overcooks the breast - but it came with delicious accompaniments, a creamy sprout purée, chunks of salsify in a vermouth sauce, and crispy strips of parsnip.

Sea bass (£17.50) came with particularly good lentils, mixed up with slow-roasted tomatoes and a little carrot and spinach, and, again, fennel. The smear of aioli over the fish, though nice enough, was hardly needed.

Dark chocolate tart with Bailey's ice cream (£6.25) sounds as though it could be a right dog's dinner. Instead, it was an intense taste, memorably good.

This is really well-prepared, generous food, at just the right level of sophistication - beyond home cooking but beneath needless pretension - in an elegant setting (though they could lose the music).

By 2.10pm nearly all the City men had paid up and gone, a disturbing sight if you're more used to West London ways. It remained only to go back up the street to sit a while in St Stephen Wallbrook, under Wren's loveliest dome. Nothing's quite as restful as knowing others all around are hard at work.

The meal cost £90 for two.